

Setting the Theater: Planning Today Provides Options for Tomorrow

■ By Lt. Gen. Gustave “Gus” Perna



Setting the theater was not an activity of concern for those of you who deployed in support of the later rotations of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. You deployed into and out of mature theaters without having to worry about things like access agreements or host-nation capacity. You deployed, executed your mission, and redeployed, and you did it well. However, it took years to establish the sustainment infrastructure that benefited your units.

In his first message as the chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Mark A. Milley said, “We will always be ready to fight today, and we will always prepare to fight tomorrow.” As we set the conditions to get ready for the next fight, we cannot assume we will enjoy the same sustainment posture that we grew accustomed to during the past 14 years.

The Changing Environment

Tomorrow’s Army will have fewer forces forward deployed. The new paradigm is a regionally aligned, primarily

continental United States-based force reliant on its ability to deploy rapidly.

Additionally, the environment in which we operate will be challenging. Our adversaries are making significant investments in anti-access and area-denial capabilities to limit and degrade our operational reach and freedom of maneuver.

Because of these major changes within the Army and in the operational environment, we must focus our efforts on ensuring our sustainment formations are still able to support geographic combatant commanders’ theater campaign plans and other operational plans. Setting the theater is an essential part of this preparation.

Setting the Theater

Army Doctrine Reference Publication 4-0, Sustainment, says setting the theater includes “all activities directed at establishing favorable conditions for conducting military operations in the theater, generally driven by the support requirements of specific operation plans and other requirements established in the geographic combatant commander’s (GCC) theater campaign plan.”

The publication goes on to explain, “Setting the theater includes whole-of-government initiatives such as bilateral or multilateral diplomatic agreements to allow U.S. forces to have access to ports, terminals, airfields, and bases within the area of responsibility (AOR) to support future military contingency operations. Setting the joint operations area (JOA) includes activities such as theater opening, establishing port and terminal operations, conducting reception, staging, onward movement, and integration, force modernization and theater-specific

training, and providing Army support to other Services and common-user logistics to Army, joint, and multinational forces operating in the JOA.”

The Theater-Opening ROC Drill

“Favorable conditions” created by setting the theater include understanding and leveraging unified action partner capacity, maximizing the use of Army pre-positioned stocks (APS), leveraging multinational capacity, and establishing the conditions for operational contract support (OCS) and financial management (FM) support success.

Earlier this year, the Sustainment Center of Excellence, Combined Arms Support Command, carefully examined the sustainment roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of Army 2025 formations during a theater opening rehearsal of concept drill. It analyzed a difficult scenario, and the findings are extensive.

Based on the observations, the Army G-4 staff has undertaken these expeditionary-focused initiatives to improve our ability to set theaters and meet global requirements as the world’s premier combat force:

- ☐ Understanding and leveraging unified action partners.
- ☐ Integrating Reserve component capabilities.
- ☐ Expanding the APS program.
- ☐ Leveraging multinational resources.
- ☐ Synchronizing OCS and FM support.

Unified Action Partners

With fewer forces forward deployed and reductions to Army logistics formations, we must intensify our learning and understanding of our unified action partner capabilities.



These include military, governmental, nongovernmental, and private-sector resources.

The theater sustainment command is responsible for theater opening and setting the theater. Additionally, Title 10 of the U.S. Code and Department of Defense executive agent responsibilities task the Army with contributing a significant portion of sustainment to support joint operations.

The Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command is the Army service component command of the U.S. Transportation Command and is responsible for port opening and operations. However, successful sea and aerial port operations rely on synchronized efforts across all of the services; these operations are inherently joint.

Annual events such as the combined joint logistics over-the-shore exercise in the U.S. Pacific Command area of operations are critical to understanding and leveraging partner capabilities.

Integrating the Reserve Component

Most of the Army's theater opening capabilities reside in our Reserve component. Efforts are underway to better integrate these capabilities with Active component assets.

Over the past year, the Army G-4 staff collaborated with the Joint Staff to broaden the apportionment of logistics forces to include many of our port and terminal operations units. G-4 is also exploring avenues to better staff, train, and equip the Army's rapid port opening elements in support of expeditionary logistics operations.

Expanding the APS Program

Having assets strategically placed around the world enables us to deploy personnel and modern, combat-ready equipment to hot spots quickly. APS also reduce the burden on strategic sea and airlift assets.

APS serve as deterrents, forcing potential enemies to account for the presence of U.S. forces, even when the operating force is not in the same vicinity as the equipment. They also demonstrate our steadfast com-

mitments to our allies and partners around the world. To this end, we use APS equipment in training exercises with our allies several times a year.

In response to the dynamics mentioned earlier, the APS program is evolving to include activity sets to support rotational forces, theater-opening and port-opening equipment sets, and mission-specific sets, like humanitarian assistance/disaster relief equipment. Next year, we will distribute equipment across multiple sites in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics. This will be followed by expansions in the Pacific, Africa, South America, and the Middle East.

Multinational Capabilities

Setting a theater inherently requires many partners, which is why we need to organize, prepare, and execute logistics support that is acceptable to all participating nations. In several theaters, we have been nurturing and expanding partnerships with our allies. A recent example is the ongoing cooperative logistics effort in the Baltic states. Another example is our enduring relationship with the Republic of Korea Army and the associated logistics partnership we have enjoyed for over 60 years.

Understanding and leveraging multinational capabilities, some of which are already forward deployed, can serve as a major component of our global responsiveness. The key is to identify requirements, determine who best can provide capabilities, and then leverage available authorities to synchronize efforts.

Multinational capabilities also include whole-of-government initiatives, such as diplomatic agreements that allow U.S. forces to have access to bases, terminals, airfields, and ports in support of military operations.

Synchronizing OCS and FM

During the U.S. response to the Ebola virus disease epidemic in Africa, we saw that setting up funds to establish contracts early is crucial to opening a new theater. Last year it was not surprising that the military's

unique skill sets, equipment, and capabilities were called on to respond to the epidemic, which required a combined logistics and medical response. In executing this response, we leveraged the multinational community and partnered with the United Nations, African and European Unions, other international partners, and nongovernmental organizations.

One reason we were effective was our ability to respond quickly by securing commercial capability to transport supplies and personnel into the region to perform medical, logistics, sanitation, and mortuary affairs support. Our ability to synchronize and integrate OCS with mission requirements not only ensured our overall success but also had a positive economic impact on the nations in which we operated.

An Army cannot be globally responsive when it takes weeks or months to deploy forces because of restrictive transportation nodes, poorly positioned equipment, nonexistent access agreements, FM systems that are not in order, or our failure to understand and employ all the sustainment assets at our disposal. Accordingly, these areas must be addressed and resolved before we have to deploy with no notice to a theater.

The days of predictable rotations are over. New missions are arising all over the world and we, as logisticians, must prepare to support an Army that is smaller but more responsive—an Army that can execute globally integrated logistics across distributed operations in a manner that allows us to fight and win. We must be ready to support ground combat operations with what we have today and tomorrow.

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